

To: Dawn Henry[dawn.henry@dpnr.vi.gov]
From: Enck, Judith
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Subject: FW: Sirenusa Response (St John VI Incident) News Clips

CNN: Other Virgin Islands vacationers may have been exposed to deadly pesticide

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/10/health/virgin-islands-vacationers-pesticide-exposure/>

By Sara Ganim and David Fitzpatrick, CNN Investigations

Updated 10:06 AM ET, Sat April 11, 2015

Story highlights

Methyl bromide is suspected to have been used improperly several times in the U.S. Virgin Islands, local officials say

Teen brothers exposed to the pesticide while on vacation are both in comas; parents are recovering

St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (CNN)

Government officials are trying to track down vacationers who stayed at villas in the Virgin Islands who may have been exposed to a deadly pesticide.

Local officials said methyl bromide is suspected to have been used improperly several times in the U.S. Virgin Islands, in different parts of the island; even the governor said his condominium complex was fumigated with it in 2013, without his knowledge.

Investigators are still trying to piece together exactly what happened at the Sirenusa resort, where a Delaware family's vacation in paradise turned into a nightmare. Theresa Devine and Steve Esmond and their two children fell gravely ill and suffered seizures; two brothers, ages 14 and 16, remain in comas.

But this was likely not an isolated incident. Local authorities here tell CNN there is evidence methyl bromide was used at least twice at the gated Sirenusa resort on St. John by the pest control company Terminix. They also say Terminix used the pesticide across the islands on different occasions.

Dawn Henry, the commissioner designee of the local Department of Planning and Natural Resources, or DPNR, said that while investigating what happened, the agency found methyl bromide was likely also used last fall at the same Sirenusa resort, as well as in a vacation villa in St. Croix and in two nontourist locations.

Methyl bromide is banned from indoor use, and is only approved as an agricultural pesticide. Other pest control companies on the Virgin Islands were found in possession of methyl bromide and officials said they are checking records to see whether it was used improperly. Ken Mapp, the governor of the Virgin Islands, said it was.

"What these companies did or appear to have been doing is clearly a violation of the law and they'll be held accountable for it," Mapp said. He said he learned his own complex was fumigated with methyl bromide in 2013, but said there have been no additional reports of people falling ill.

Authorities are trying to track down anyone who has stayed at the affected villas or who might have been exposed.

Terminix issued a statement saying it is "committed to performing all work ... in a manner that is safe for our customers, employees, the public and the environment" and is "looking into this matter internally, and cooperating with authorities."

When CNN visited the Terminix office on St. Thomas, which is corporate-owned, an employee refused to comment, and another employee closed the door.

Henry said all canisters of methyl bromide known to exist in the area have been confiscated and will be shipped off-island for destruction as soon as possible.

In the meantime, an attorney for Esmond and Devine said the family is still struggling. The two teenage boys remain in comas. Their father has regained consciousness and is slowly getting better. Devine is in better condition and is undergoing occupational therapy.

DPNR, the local environmental agency, already had been under scrutiny. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which has oversight, designated it "high risk," saying the agency "does not meet management standards." The EPA's inspector general is also investigating.

According to the Department of Justice, a former commissioner and two DPNR directors have been sentenced to jail terms since 2008. That year, Dean C. Plaskett was sentenced to nine years for receiving kickbacks in awarding local government contracts.

In 2014, Roberto Tapia, the Justice Department said, pleaded guilty to using his position to engage in illegal drug trafficking while he was head of that same agency. He was sentenced to 70 months in federal prison.

In January, Mapp was sworn in and appointed Henry as a new designee to run the department, so it is under a new administration. A spokeswoman for the EPA said the DPNR has been cooperative in this investigation.

She added that none of the troubles the agency has had are directly related to pesticide enforcement, but instead general practices.

Mapp said the agency's problems have nothing to do with what happened to the Devine and Esmond's family. Instead, he blames the pesticide companies.

"It occurred because someone was cutting corners, thought they could enhance their profit margin and thought they could get away with it, and apparently in my own residence someone had been getting away with it for quite some time," Mapp said.

Part of the investigation, he said, will be tracking whether the proper paperwork was filled out when the canisters were ordered, or if the pesticide was smuggled in.

The Department of Justice is also investigating.

"If they purchased it and on these forms they said their use was for agriculture purposes, which is the only legal way they could use it, and then brought them into the territory and used them in commercial and residential buildings, that's a clear and malice violation of the law," Mapp said.

Mapp: Pesticide linked to poisoning used widely in V.I.

By ALDETH LEWIN

VI Daily News

April 9, 2015

The local investigation into methyl bromide poisoning on St. John that left a Delaware family hospitalized revealed that several other pest control companies in the territory also use the toxic pesticide.

At a press conference on St. Croix on Wednesday, Gov. Kenneth Mapp said the government will not reveal the names of the additional companies in possession of methyl bromide until a final report is issued.

He said if the companies are using the chemical in an approved manner, they will not be in trouble. If they are found to have misused the pesticide in a residential area - which is restricted - their names will be revealed, Mapp said.

The family of four - Stephen Esmond, Theresa Devine and their two teenage sons, Sean and Ryan - had rented Villa Capri at Sirenusa Condominium Resort on St. John from March 14 through March 22.

On March 20, the family was admitted to Schneider Hospital with symptoms of methyl bromide poisoning. Over the course of a few days, all four were airlifted to stateside hospitals for continued treatment.

Last week, the Environmental Protection Agency, which is investigating the incident with the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources, confirmed that the chemical found in an adjacent unit was methyl bromide.

The joint investigation found that on March 18, two days before the family was hospitalized, Terminix treated the unit below the one in which the family was staying. Terminix told investigators they were treating for powder post beetles, an insect that eats wood.

Methyl bromide is an odorless gas used as a fumigated pesticide. However, its use is highly restricted because of its toxicity, and it is not supposed to be used in residential environments.

DPNR has issued two "stop use" orders to Terminix, one for each district, to stop using any product containing methyl bromide and to quarantine any of the chemical that may be in the company's possession.

A criminal investigation has been launched by the U.S. Justice Department, according to documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

"I want you to know, the public to know, that Terminix and the other companies in the territory will be held fully accountable for the misapplication and use of these poisons," Mapp said Wednesday. "They should have known, they are in a position to know, that these poisons have been banned."

Mapp said he has asked the V.I. Licensing and Consumer Affairs Department to join the investigations and conduct a full review of Terminix and any other company that may warrant it.

Mapp said he will wait for the final report from DPNR, which should include recommendations about possible legal action the local government can take.

"We will make a determination if we need to mobilize and implement some additional legal review by our local department of justice," Mapp said.

"We will spare no resources in assisting the family to the extent that they may need assistance. We will spare no resources in ensuring that no other residents or visitor to the territory is exposed to these noxious gases, and we will ensure that the companies who have these gasses in their possession and those that have used them thus far, will pay this government for any and all expenses that we have to endure to bring and rectify this problem," Mapp said.

A spokesman for the Esmond family said earlier this week that Devine has been discharged from the hospital and is doing well; Esmond is improving and stable; but the two boys still are in critical condition.

According to the EPA, the short-term inhalation of methyl bromide can cause severe injury to the lungs. Acute and chronic inhalation of methyl bromide can lead to neurological effects in humans, according to the EPA.

The poisoning incident on St. John has received national coverage in the news media, which has led the V.I. Tourism Department to activate its emergency website, www.usviupdate.com.

On the site is a statement on the matter by Tourism Commissioner designee Beverly Nicholson-Doty and a few frequently asked questions with answers indicating that this is an isolated event and that it still is safe to travel to the territory.

Information about the incident and the investigations will be circulated to local hotels and those in the tourism industry, Tourism spokeswoman Luana Wheatley said in a written statement Wednesday.

"Our sales team will also receive the above information in the event they have to field questions from travel agents and tour operators," she said.

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